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AUTHOR Lilly, Edward R.
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ABSTRACT

The concept of superintendent "vision" as a key element of effective leadership is discussed in this paper, which develops a framework for understanding the creation of vision, its implementation and articulation, and organizational impact. Vision differs from strategy in that it represents a set of beliefs about the school district's aspiring role in the educational arena. The first section offers a literature review of the definitions and concepts of vision. The second section discusses superintendents' major task--to create shared visions among members of a diverse organization. Variables in the interpretive process associated with envisioning are described. The next section examines the communication of vision to district personnel and offers 22 suggestions, which include consideration of compatibility with the organizational culture, continual communication, and sharing with different organizational levels. Vision is viewed as an integral part of the overall strategic management process. (19 references) (LMI)

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Edward R. Lilly, Ph.D.

Assistant Dean

The City College of The City University of New York

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Edward A. Lilly, Ph.D.

Assistant Dean

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Leadership in the school district context can be conceived as a phenomenon which is a shared and social process, is symbolic in nature, focuses on the organization as a whole, is oriented toward the creation of change, and takes place within an organizational context which will impact upon what the superintendent can do.

However, there is another concept that must be developed to help explain the process of what leadership is and what superintendents do. Recently, the concept of superintendent "vision" has been given much attention as a key element to effective leadership. The vision of the superintendent and other district administrators should be thought of as the catalysts for the change process throughout the school system. Vision can be incorporated into the superintendent's leadership process as the means by which he or she interprets district and environmental issues, and creates meaning out of them for other organizational members and the school community at large.

Much of the strategic leadership tasks of the superintendent involves making decisions regarding the strategic position of the school district relative to its environment. An objective view of the environment would suggest that superintendents must be rational decision-makers, and will make the appropriate choices if they have access to correct information.

A widely held view by some organizational theorists is that of the perceived environment. Superintendents must be concerned with the ex-tent to which their perceptions of the environment might be "flawed". An alternative model is of the school district and its environment as enacted by its participants (Weick, 1979). School districts and environments are patterns of activity, generated by human actions and intellectual efforts to make sense out of

EA 023 752

these actions (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985). From this enacted, interpretive perspective, the superintendent's task is an imaginative, creative one. It is from this perspective that school district personnel make sense of their situations by engaging in interpretive processes that form the basis for organized behavior. School superin-tendents and other administrators influence the meaning of district events and experiences.

Smircich and Morgan (1982), expand the view of traditional leadership and conceptualize leadership as the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others. Superintendents emerge as leaders because they are able to mobilize meaning, and articulate and define what has previously remained implicit or unspoken. In the school context, effective administrators are able to provide an image or pattern of thinking in a way that has meaning to district personnel that are directly involved (Quinn, 1980).

If we are to understand how leadership works, then we need to focus on how leadership actions attempt to shape and interpret situations to guide district personnel into a common interpretation of reality.

Tangential to the view of leadership as the management of meaning are Schein's (1985) view that the superintendent has the major respon-sibility for effectively guiding the school district's initiatives, primarily through the administrator's influence on the creation and maintenance of organizational cultures.

Siehl and Martin (1984) suggest that top administrators use sym-bolism, in the form of jargon and stories, to transmit and institution-alize organizational culture and values.

Pfeffer (1981) suggest that meanings are created through language, ceremonies, symbols, and settings. Shared language (Edelman, 1977; Pondy, 1978) is also seen as a way in which a common set of beliefs and understandings emerge. A vision that is articulated in a language shared by all district personnel, and implemented through the use of ceremonies and symbols, are perhaps be the most effective tool that a superintendent can use in changing the focus of the school district.

The superintendent emerges as a creator of meaning, using vision as a tool to frame school district action. The superintendent as chief ad-ministrative officer and manager of meaning signals a focus on the cog-nitive, political and social processes within the district. Vision is con-nected to the transformation of organizations, and is a key variable to leading the organization through the process of strategic change (Tichy and Devanna, 1986; Bennis and Nanus, 1985).

What is vision? According to the New Webster Dictionary vision is defined as: (a) something seen otherwise than by ordinary sight (as in a dream or trance), (b) the act or power of imagination, (c) a vivid picture created by the imagination, and (d) unusual foresight in foreseeing what is going to happen. Westley and Mintzberg (1987) suggest that strategic vision is conceptually distinct but empirically embedded in the concept of strategic style.

Bass (1985) defines "envisioning" as "creating an image of a desired future state". Bennis and Nanus (1985) have defined vision as:

"a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization....(which) articulates a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization, a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists."

I am convinced that vision is more than an image of the future. Vision is the envisioning process. It is the process by which images for the future emerge and become a part of organizational life. Vision is not just the scope and purpose of the school district. It goes beyond the idea of the future, beyond the printed mission statement. It is articulated by the superintendent and associated with that superintendent. Vision is both an image and a process, whereby ideas for the future of the school district are created, formalized through words and print, interpreted and trans-formed by school district personnel.

A vision is different from a strategy in that a vision represents a set of beliefs about the school district's aspired role in the educational arena. The intended or stated strategy of a a school district is a much more specific statement regarding the present and future resource deployment, both human and financial, and community interactions that indicate how the district

will achieve its objectives. A vision when ar-ticulated by the superintendent serves to both motivate and guide school district personnel, as well as constrain and limit their behaviors.

The articulation of a vision for the future by the board of education, superintendent, and other district administrators aids in the change process by:

1. Focusing district attention on a desired future state, allowing district personnel to visualize their role in the change, and generating optimism for the future. (Beckhard and Harris, 1987).

2. Introducing a new way to interpret the overall mission of the district, replacing "prevailing myths" that guide individual behavior throughout the school district. (Jonsson and Lundin, 1977).

3. Providing a means for mobilizing commitment to future action. (Kanter, 1983).

4. Acting as a control function and roadmap, and as a benchmark whereby individual and organizational performance can be evaluated. (Robbins and Duncan, 1988).

5. Encouraging the use of creative imagery as a way of generating creative solutions to problems. (Howe, 1989).

When school district administrators articulate a vision, they are in essence stating a set of cognitions about the desired future direction of the district. Focusing district attention on a desired future state is con-sidered a critical initial element in the organizational change process (Beckhard and Harris, 1987).

The envisioning process refers to the process by which visions within the school district are created and implemented. The envisioning process consists of both cognitive and social subprocesses and as a result, a new district vision for the future may emerge. This vision may be negotiated by top management, to result in a consensus organizational vision. This vision is then incorporated into the change process, is communicated to district personnel, and institutionalized into the organization.

The definition of vision which has been most widely discussed in the literature is one of vision as some sort of aspiration, or intended state for the future of the school district. Of course, this definition neglects the highly charged emotional aspects of a vision. When we describe a superintendent as having vision, we not only describe the intended future state, but also place some aspiration that this desired future will occur. Additionally, we know that individuals at all levels of the district may hold visions and aspirations for the future, which may concur with or differ from the vision of the superintendent.

This perspective on vision is significantly different from the widely used definitions of vision in the literature (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, Tichy and Devanna, 1986, Bass, 1985), which focus on the existence of a single vision in an organization. This definition acknowledges that there can be as many visions for the future of the school district as there are district employees. The major task of the superintendent and other administrators is to create shared visions, however, the visions of individuals may vary due to selective perceptions of the environment based on their personal background (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), or, in the case of a diverse, decentralized organization, the presence of unique task environments which are not shared.

The variables that tend to influence the interpretive processes associated with envisioning are:

1. Superintendent Management Team Composition. The tenure, composition, and experiences of the top management team may impact the nature of the interpretive processes in the school district. Vision does not occur in a vacuum, and conversations and interactions with and among top management will influence vision.

2. Board of Education Characteristics. The composition of board members, their experiences, and tenure on the board will also impact vision. This variable has not previously been discussed in the literature. However, the board, which in many cases approves major policy changes and resultant expenditures, must ultimately buy into the vision of the

superintendent. If the board's interpretation of the environment differs from the superintendent's, conflict over priorities may occur.

3. Individual Variables. Interpretation processes will be influ-enced not only by the individual's prior experiences, but also by the superintendent's style of management and personal value systems.

4. School District Characteristics. The district's history, cul-ture, structure, and processes will also impact vision, to the extent that they constrain the domain of future possibilities which are envisioned for the district.

5. School-Community Characteristics. The school-community and the district's relationship to neighboring school districts and com-munities will play a role in shaping the interpretive processes of in-dividual district employees. This influence is both direct and indirect, through its influence on organizational culture.

Upon closer examination of the concept of vision creation, several questions surface as important issues to be addressed by the super-intendent:

1. To what extent does each of the variables which effect vision creation have an impact on the resulting vision? Which of these variables are most important?

2. Under what conditions will the superintendent take different types of actions to implement the vision?

3. Under what conditions will the superintendent's vision be modified, as opposed to the superintendent acting to achieve the original vision?

4. Does the content of the vision effect the superintendent's modification processes?

5. How does the board of education influence vision creation?

The process of vision implementation consist of the activities of the superintendent and other top administrators to communicate the superintendent's articulated vision to school district personnel.

The communication of vision includes both subtle and direct com-munication, and indirect communication processes which are used to articulate the superintendent's vision to

organizational members. For example, the superintendent might convey the desire for needed organizational and curricular change, and is interested in consensus, by sending district personnel to training programs, reshuffling and replacing top management, and reorganizing physical space. More directly, the superintendent might write memorandums, bulletins, and/or reports to district personnel and the constituent community, on a regular basis to let them know what is going on throughout the district. The holding of monthly communications meetings with district staff, as well as other numerous face to face meetings with the community at large often proves to be an effective change resistant strategy. Additionally, encouraging top management to develop formal communications plans for their divisions can be beneficial to the process of vision acceptance.

The importance and use of formal mission statements for the internalization and communication of vision is a critical dimension of the envisioning process. This stage of the process is related to what Tichy and Devanna (1986) call Institutionalizing Change, and what Bennis and Nanus (1985) call Changing the Social Architecture. This stage involves the simultaneous processes of gaining commitment to the vision and creating organizational forms which reinforce the vision. Thus, the creation of a shared vision in the form of a mission statement and district objectives appears important not so much for what the content of the vision is, but rather, that it symbolizes the coming of the new organization.

The following questions related to vision implementation pose im-portant issues that should be addressed by the superintendent:

1. Are some implementation tools more important than others in gaining commitment to and institutionalizing the vision?

2. Is direct contact form the superintendent to district personnel important in vision communication, or can the message of the vision be more clearly transmitted through divisional administrators?

3. What is the relationship between the number and types of meet-ings in the district and the vision implementation process?

4. How important are symbols, such as a mission statement, in vision implementation?

Finally, the most critical aspect of envisioning is the extent to which district personnel at all levels understand and use the vision in their daily lives. At levels of the organization which are further from the top, what becomes more important than a statement of vision for setting direction, are the tangible changes in structure and programs which are implemented and which become associated with the vision.

Important questions related to the impact of vision on the organization are:

1. What causes multiple referent leaders to emerge in organiza-tions?

2. Do all organizational members reinterpret vision?

3. Is vision just a top-management phenomenon, or is it equally important for non-administrators? What concepts do non-administrators use to understand organizational meaning and direction?

4. What are the implications of multiple leadership for the organi-zation?

The articulation of vision, post hoc, provides a justification for organizational actions, legitimizing decisions,and creating credibility. Vision drives the creation of mission, and can be a unifying force throughout the school district, giving employees a sense of purpose and way to understand organizational actions.

A review of the literature provides little information as to what types of visions are the vest for a particular organization, what's a good or a bad vision, or what types of content they should have. At any rate, taking this approach to vision would undoubtedly prove to be fruitless. Vision, and its resulting mission and strategies, are an interpretive, symbolic tool, thus, the essence of vision is its spirit and its process. The important thing about vision is that it makes sense to the people throughout the school district. The visionary superintendent must not only have a vision which seems credible, but must attend to process: attend to multiple sub-cultures, attend to employees at all levels, and give subordinates room to do their own interpretations of the environment.

The concept of the referent leader must be added to leadership theories to expand our understanding of how individuals in organizations use leadership processes to gain understanding, meaning and direction. If we assume that there are more than one legitimate leader in an organization, we can begin to review the implications for developing not only theories of leadership, but for developing leaders.

If we truly believe that school districts exist in an enacted environment, then the role of the superintendent is interpretive: he or she must consider the use of symbols, dramas, values, language, and metaphors in day to day operations. The role of the superintendent is to analyze and to create contexts. Therefore, the following advice and themes is offered to superintendents and other top district admin-istrators:

1. Thoroughly understand the position and perspectives of the school board and other top administrators, and the strategic contingencies facing the school district. This will prevent the superintendent from taking a premature position which will result in a vision which cannot be implemented.

2. Vision does not become controversial until it is clearly artic-ulated and becomes adopted as a organizational symbol. Utilize informal discussions with school board and other top administrators as a way of discovering their organizational priorities, while making yours known.

3. Don't confuse vision with mission. Vision drives mission and strategy.

4. Encourage different levels of organization to develop their own visions in the spirit and umbrella of the superintendent vision.

5. Vision is evolutionary, emerging from the previous strategies of the school district.

6. Vision is defining what you don't do, and a way of directing attention to a particular set of strategic choices.

7. Vision is constrained by the culture of the organization and values of top administration and the board of education.

8. A superintendent can meet resistance to change in vision if it is incompatible with the culture of the organization.

9. Vision differentiates a school district from other school dis-tricts.

10. Communicating a new vision to an organization is a slow pro-cess.

11. The superintendent must be a cheerleader, and getting district personnel excited about the direction of the organization.

12. The superintendent can engage in the education of school board members and other administrators, as to the importance of his ideas or vision.

13. A vision should announce a general direction, yet leave room for organizational members to contribute in its implementation.

14. A vision is used by the superintendent as a tool for determining which district personnel are "on board".

15. The superintendent does not operate in a vacuum, but discusses and refines ideas with members of the administrative team and the school board.

16. The superintendent often knows intuitively what his vision is, but has difficulty articulating the process retrospectively.

17. The informal network of top management contributes toward refining the vision of the superintendent.

18. Personal values are important in shaping the superintendent's vision for the school district.

19. Members of top management desire and want to believe that they can impact on the future direction of the district.

20. Top administrators and head of district divisions view themselves as "chiefs" of their own domains, and need to develop vision for their own units, as well as linking divisional visions into overall school district visions.

21. The continual communication process is necessary for reinforcing new vision into the minds of organizational members.

22. The superintendent's vision for the future is greater than what is articulated in a mission statement. A vision can be about the kind of atmosphere and values to be achieved in the organization.

Vision must be studied not as it stands in isolation, but as part of the overall strategic management process. Theories must be developed about the relationship between vision and strategy formulation, and between vision and strategy implementation. Vision should be studied as it fits into the process or organizational creation and reorientation.

This discussion reflects the first step in an attempt to clarify the concept of vision, and lay out the components of a process by which visions are created by top management, communicated to organizational members, interpreted, and translated into organizational action. If this framework is further expanded, it will be a critical step in beginning to research this little understood phenomenon and important component of organization leadership.

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